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The State of Irish Whiskey

Dominated by large, well-known brands, Irish whiskey is seeing growth among super-premium expressions and focusing on sustainable ways of doing business

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Photo credit: Adobe Stock

The Irish whiskey category has become a staple around the world, particularly in the U.S., where more than six million cases of the spirit were sold last year, according to the [Distilled Spirits Council of the United States \(DISCUS\)](#). What has made Ireland's native spirit so popular?

Though it's anchored by a few well-known brands, Irish whiskey is becoming increasingly varied—and [newcomers are playing a role](#). Buyers are exploring the wide world of [Irish single malts](#), while distillers are experimenting with [unique cask finishes](#).

Here, *SevenFifty Daily* summarizes the state of the Irish whiskey industry today, highlighting current data around sales, exports, and projected growth from key industry sources. We also take a brief look back at major moments in Irish whiskey history, and the spirit's common characteristics. For a deeper look into the latest in Irish whiskey, [download our by-the-numbers infographic](#).



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Irish Whiskey Today



Following the U.S., the largest markets for Irish whiskey include the U.K.—which commanded five percent of the category in 2021—followed by **Ireland, Germany, and Poland**, according to [IWSR Drinks Market Analysis](#).

14 million cases of Irish whiskey were sold globally in 2021, according to the Irish Whiskey Association's [2022 Irish Whiskey Global Report](#)—an increase of 21 percent from 2020.

The U.S. holds approximately **40 percent** of volume share, according to [IWSR Drinks Market Analysis](#). Data also indicates that consumption of Irish whiskey in the U.S. increased in volume by **15 percent in 2021**.



The State of Irish Whiskey



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IRISH WHISKEY, BY THE NUMBERS

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High-end Irish whiskey expressions are becoming increasingly prominent; since 2003, premium Irish whiskey grew a staggering **1,053 percent** and super-premium Irish whiskey grew **2,769 percent**, according to DISCUS.

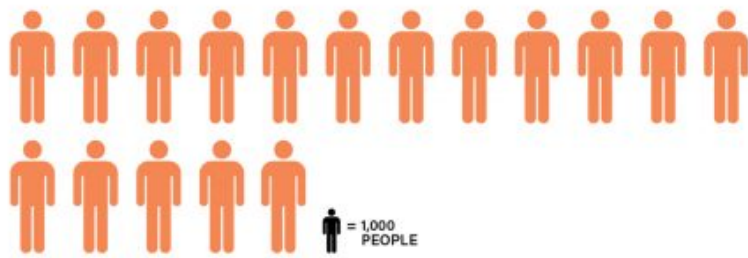
In 2022, more than **6.1 million nine-liter cases** of Irish whiskey were sold in the U.S., according to DISCUS. That's \$1.4 billion in revenue for distillers.

HIGH GROWTH



U.S. dollar sales of Irish whiskey totaled over **\$570 million** in 2022, with over 21.8 million units sold, according to [NielsenIQ](#). This is down slightly from 2021, when U.S. dollar sales of Irish whiskey added up to over \$579 million, with 22.7 million units sold.

Local Impact



€700 MILLION

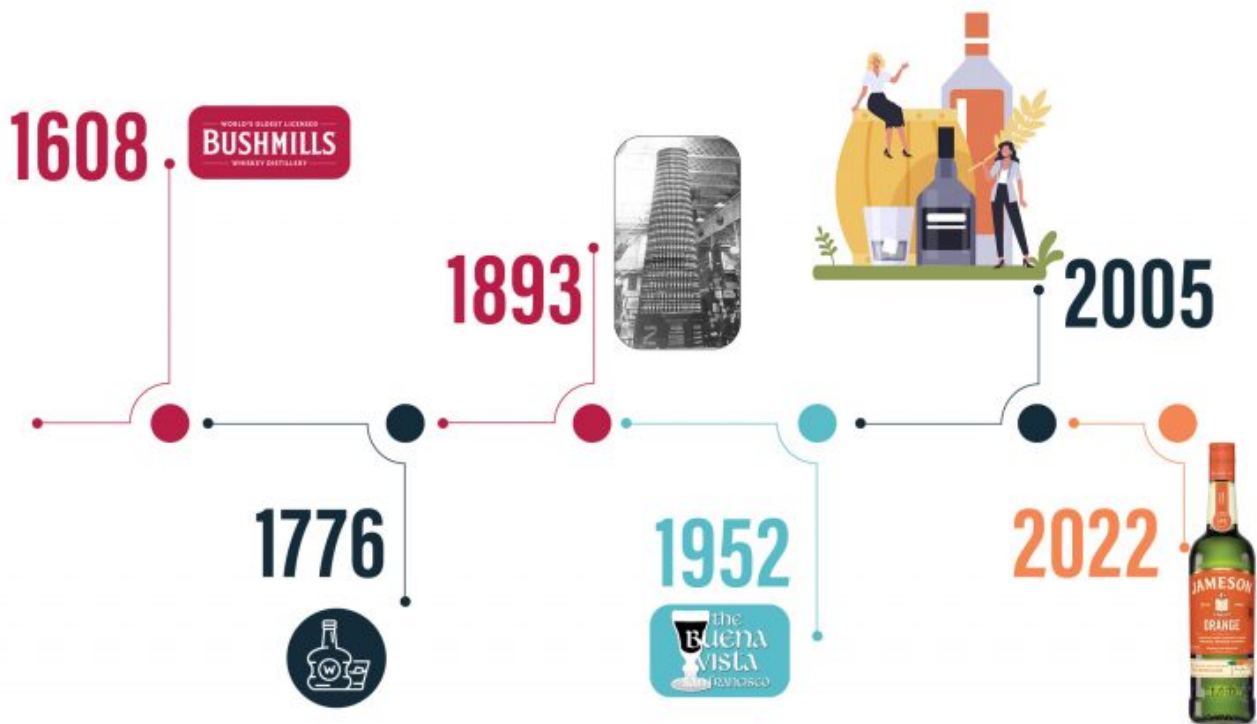
in gross value to the economy.



The Irish whiskey industry directly employs over 1,700 people in Ireland, according to the [Irish Whiskey Association](#), contributing approximately **€700 million** in gross value to the economy.

€63 million was spent in local communities by visitors to distilleries, according to the Irish Whiskey Association.

Irish Whiskey History



- **1608:** The first licensed Irish whiskey distillery, Bushmills in Northern Ireland, is founded.
- **1776:** McConnell's is founded in Belfast. Along with Waterford, it is one of a few brands who have dropped the “e” all branding, referring to the category as Irish whisky. Decades ago, Irish whiskey was, like its Scottish counterparts, also referred to as whisky, but the “e” was incorporated to differentiate the category.
- **1893:** Powers Irish Whiskey takes part in the Chicago World's Fair by building a striking tower of Powers bottles.
- **1952:** Starring Irish whiskey, the cream-topped Irish Coffee is popularized in the U.S. at San Francisco's The Buena Vista, courtesy of travel writer Stanton Delaplane. The Buena Vista now churns out a staggering 2,000 Irish Coffees a day.
- **2005:** Helen Mulholland is named master blender at Bushmills, making her the first woman in Irish whiskey history to hold this position; she was also the first woman to receive a Chairman's Award

from the Irish Whiskey Association. When Mulholland moved to [Athrú Whiskey](#) in 2021, Bushmills carried on their legacy of having women at the helm with Alex Thomas.

- **2022:** [Jameson](#) ventures into flavored Irish whiskey territory with the debut of [Jameson Orange](#). Another innovation, the ready-to-drink Jameson Ginger & Lime, followed soon after.

Characteristics



Irish whiskey is characterized by malted barley,

although pot-still varieties allow for the addition of other unmalted cereal grains.

Irish whiskey is rarely peated, but there are a few exceptions, including [The Connemara](#), [Kilbeggan Black](#), [Teeling Blackpitts](#), and Waterford's Fenniscourt and Ballybannon single malts.

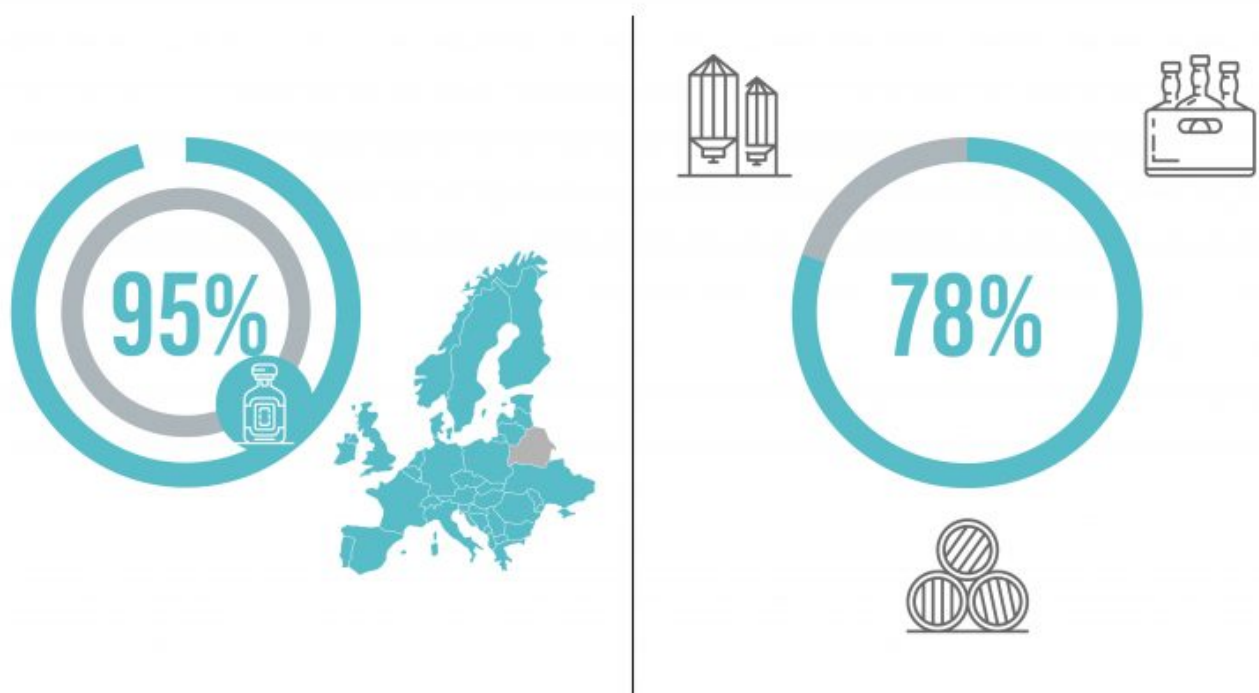
In 2010, there were only four whiskey distilleries in operation in Ireland, garnering sales of less than five million cases. **Today there are over 40 on the island**, producing around 110 million LPA of whiskey every year, according to the Irish Whiskey Association.

Going Green

[Drinks Ireland](#), which represents Irish drink manufacturers and suppliers, along with [Irish Distillers](#), [William Grant & Sons](#), and [Diageo](#), has entered an agreement with [Teagasc](#), Ireland's agricultural and food development

authority, to support a more eco-minded supply of Irish grain as part of the Teagasc Signpost Farm initiative.

Irish Distillers—known for Jameson, Powers, [Redbreast](#), and [Midleton Very Rare](#)—launched the Sustainable Green Spring Barley Scheme, working with over 200 barley growers to help reduce their carbon footprint and promote biodiversity. They also announced plans for the Midleton Distillery, in County Cork, to become carbon neutral by 2026.



Over 95 percent of all glass bottles used for Irish whiskey are currently sourced in the U.K. or EU, according to the Irish Whiskey Association. The group notes that **78 percent** of Irish whiskey producers have switched suppliers in search of a more sustainable or resilient supply chain.

Irish Whiskeys to Watch



Northcross

Ireland's largest independent distillery, [Great Northern Distillery](#), in County Louth, has prime access to pure water from the Cooley Mountains. It is home to such brands as [Northcross Triple Wood Whiskey](#), which comprises a blend of whiskeys matured in former bourbon, sherry, and virgin American oak casks.

West Cork Distilleries

Along with its bourbon and Black Cask varieties, [West Cork Distillers](#)—founded in 2003 by childhood friends John O'Connell, Denis McCarthy, and Ger McCarthy—experiments with innovative finishes. Some are aged for an additional six months in casks that previously held Blacks of Kinsale IPA and Blacks of Kinsale stout beers; others in barrels using peat and bog oak culled from Glengarriff Forest.

The Busker

At its state-of-the-art Royal Oak Distillery in County Carlow, [The Busker](#) produces all three classic styles of Irish whiskey—single grain, single malt, and single pot still. The mellowing of its blend, Triple Cask Triple Smooth, and Single Grain expressions all take place in rare Cantine Florio Sicilian Marsala wine casks from 1833.

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Alia Akkam is a writer who covers food, drink, travel, and design. She is the author of Behind the Bar: 50 Cocktails from the World's Most Iconic Hotels (Hardie Grant) and her work has appeared in Architecturaldigest.com, Dwell.com, Penta, Vogue.com, BBC, Playboy, and Taste, among others, and she is a former editor at Edible Queens, Hospitality Design, and Beverage Media. A native New Yorker, Alia now calls Budapest home. Follow Alia @behdria.

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